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THE FABLE AS POETRY IN ENGLISH CRITICISM

In a discussion of the rimed fable in England (*Mod. Lang. Notes*, xxxi, 206) I hazarded the use of the prose Aesop in the schools as an explanation of the rather odd fact that we have no collection of fables in verse from the days of Henrisone to the end of the sixteenth century. The enthusiastic veneration for Aesop as a poet manifested by Lydgate and Henrisone gave place to a more familiar regard for him as a teller of moral or pithy anecdotes. True as I believe this conjecture to be, on the whole, a fair presentation of the case calls for a recognition of the fact that during this period we have an expression of critical opinion specifically referring to Aesop as a poet, and to the fable as a form of poetry. A consideration of the extent to which the poetic concept of the fable prevailed and the extremes to which this was carried in a later century would seem a necessary complement to the previous discussion.

It was no reminiscence of Latin elegiacs or medieval regard that called forth the first and most famous pronouncement in the Elizabethan period, but the Puritan attack upon poetry. When that began, the exemplary and moral character of the fable made Aesop, the poet, a valuable ally for the defense, and it is in this capacity that he appears in Sidney's eulogium of the poet, in which we are told that "the Poet is indeed the right Popular Philosopher, whereof *Esops* tales give good prooffe."

This passage and that in which Sidney declares that "Infinite proofes of the strange effects of this poetick invention might be alledged," citing the fable of Menenius Agrippa, are too well-known to need quotation.¹

Sidney's conception of poetry was quite in accord with renaissance theory; its defense was its ethical import.² Furthermore, Sidney conceived of poetry as determined rather by the creative invention of the writer than by any canon of form. A more strictly æsthetic theory was in process of formulation even with Sidney himself, but his influence was such as to assist in

¹ *Apologie for Poetrie*, Arber's Reprint, p. 35 and p. 41.

² *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith, Oxford, 1904, I, xxiv ff.

the continuance of this identification of fable and poesy. It is clearly with Sidney before him that Davenant writes in the preface to *Gondibert*, 1651:

And it appears that Poesy hath for its natural prevailing over the Understandings of Men (sometimes making her conquests with easie plainness, like native country Beauty) been very successful in the most grave, and important occasions that the necessities of States or mankinde have produc'd. For it may be said that Demosthenes sav'd the Athenians by the Fable or Parable of the Doggs and Wolves, in answer to King Philip's Proposition; ³

then follows an allusion to the famous telling of the fable of the Belly and the Members by Menenius Agrippa.

Bacon no more than Sidney escapes the medieval tradition which gave to the allegoric in poetry a high value. He too seems to include fable among the kinds of poetry. In *De Augmentis Scientiarum*,⁴ 1623, he speaks of "Parabolical Poesy" as being of a higher character than either Narrative or Dramatic, and points out how it serves for a double use and contrary purposes, being employed both for "an enfoldment," and for "illustration." "In the latter case," he remarks, "the object is a certain method of teaching, in the former an artifice for concealment." As a method of teaching, "Parabolical Poesy" was useful in bringing ideas "nearer to the sense" by a "kind of resemblances and examples." "And hence," he continues, "the ancient times are full of all kinds of fables, parables, enigmas, and similitudes, as may appear by the numbers of Pythagoras, the enigmas of the Sphinx, the fables of Aesop, and the like." Fables, however, are more or less obsolete, he concludes, for "Fables, as has been said elsewhere, were formerly substitutes and supplements of examples, but now that the times abound with history, the aim is more true and active when the mark is alive."

The author of *Hudibras*, in the observations scattered through his notebooks, expresses himself much in the tone and manner of Bacon, although he conceives only one of Bacon's two functions of "Parabolical Poesy," or allegory, as we should say, namely, the illustrative. The other he denies. His comments on the nature of the fable deserve a passing notice:

³ *The Works of Sir Wm. Davenant*, London, 1673, p. 19.

⁴ Ed. Ellis and Spedding, Re-ed. J. M. Robertson, London, 1905, p. 593; see also in *Adv. of Learning*, *ibid.*, p. 88.

Men take so much Delight in lying that Truth is sometimes forced to disguise herself in the habit of False-hood to get entertainment as in Fables and Apologues frequently used by the Ancients, and in this she is not at all unjust, for Falshood do's very commonly usurp her Person.⁵

This passage, which in a rather contradictory way seems to admit a kind of "Enfoldment," after all, as a function of allegory, hits at the essential nature of the fable, indicating it as a device to give common-place truth an attractive appearance of novelty. For the most part, however, Butler has use for allegory only when it serves to convey some unfamiliar or little-obvious truth. But the high value he places on fables he expresses thus:

The easiest way to understand Truth is by Fables and Apologues that have nothing at all of Truth in them. For Truth ha's little or nothing to do in the Affayres of the World, although all things of the Greatest weight and moment are managed in her Name, like a weake Princessse, that has the Title only, and Pretence and Falsehood all the Power.

Sidney emphasized the power of the fable to influence men's conduct through an appeal to their imaginations; Bacon, although still in a way identifying fable and poesy, emphasizes the value of fable as a means of illuminating the understanding; Butler sees in the fable a means of utilizing for good man's natural depravity. If Butler had been speaking of the fable even more distinctly as a poetic form, this idea of its falsity would have been in complete agreement with the renaissance and medieval idea that poetry was an agreeable form of lying. These two ideas, that the end of poetry was moral instruction⁶ and that poetry was essentially false,⁷ old as the days preceding Aristotle, surviving to the age of English Anne, did something to put the fable theoretically in prominent place among poetic forms in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Add to these the confusion arising from the two separate meanings bound up in the very word "fable," and we have a situation which distorts and confuses values most notably. The word

⁵ *Characters and Passages from Note-Books*, ed. A. R. Waller, Cambridge, 1908, pp. 282, 401, 397, 478. See also p. 443.

⁶ *Literary Criticism*, Spingarn, N. Y., 1899, 7 ff., 19 ff., 270; *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, Butcher, London, 1907, 215 ff., 238-239.

⁷ Spingarn, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

"fable" today, of course, means both a distinct form of allegory, and also plot or argument. Formerly no sharp distinction was made between these two meanings. Even in Aristotle's day the same word was used for both ideas, namely *μῦθος*, although for the Aesopic tale *αἶνος* and *γέλοιος* were also used. The Latin word "*fabula*" continued the confusion.

The common association of the two concepts with the word "fable" appears in Dryden's "Remarks on the Empress of Morocco:"^s "If," he writes, "they [i. e. dramatists] invent impossible fables, like some of Aesop's, they ought to have such morals couched under them, as may tend to the instruction of mankind, or the regulation of manners, or they can be of no use; nor can they really delight any but such as would be pleased with Tom Thumb, without these circumstances." Dryden is here merely saying that if dramatists' plots are as lacking in probability as Aesop's fables, to have any merit at all, they should at least be as useful as those fables. Dryden is not identifying the two ideas.

In Blackmore and Dennis, however, we get a complete identification of the two meanings of the word, and also an insistence upon the moral end of poetry. In the Preface to *Prince Arthur*, 1695, Sir Richard Blackmore shows how completely "Universal" and "Allegoric," "Fable" and "Plot" were identified:

An Epick Poem is a feign'd or devis'd Story of an Illustrious Action, related in Verse, in a *Allegorical*, Probable, Delightful and Admirable manner, to cultivate the Mind with instructions of Vertue. 'Tis a feign'd or devis'd Discourse; that is, a *Fable*; and so it agrees with Tragedy and Comedy. The word Fable at first signified indifferently a true or false story, therefore Cicero for distinction used *Fictas Fabulas* in his Book *de Finibus*. But afterwards Custom obtain'd to use the word always for a feign'd Discourse. And in the first Ages, especially in the Eastern World, great use was made by Learned and Wise Men of these feign'd Discourses, Fables or Apologues, to teach the ruder and more unpolish'd Part of Mankind. . . . So Thales, Orpheus, Solon, Homer, and the rest of the great Men in those ages have done, and the famous Philosopher Socrates is by some affirm'd to be the Author of many of the Fables that pass under Aesop's name.

Confusion is apparent when Blackmore finds it necessary to dilate on Aesopic fable in a discussion of the argument of an

^s *Works*, ed. Walter Scott, London, 1808, xv, 412.

epic or the plot of a tragedy. The deep gulf fixed today between the two sorts of narrative, the one allegoric, and the other typical or universal, did not exist.

And John Dennis, who did not feel that Blackmore had laid sufficient stress upon the didactic in the epic, comes out flatly in his rejoinder, "On the Moral and Conclusion of an Epick Poem:"

Now I know no difference that there is, between one of Aesop's Fables, and the Fable of an Epick Poem, as to their Natures, tho' there be many and great ones, as to their circumstances (i. e. incidents to be treated, setting, style, etc.). 'Tis impossible for a Poet to form any Fable, unless the Moral be first in his Head.⁹

Other criticism of the type appeared in the eighteenth century periodicals, and still other in the prefaces and miscellaneous writings of the eighteenth century indicating a reaction against the excessive popularity of the form, but this survey will be sufficient to show the process by which the fable came to occupy a rather important position in the criticism of the seventeenth century, and by a species of annexation, to figure beside the epic and the tragedy. In the middle of the eighteenth century, the Swiss critics, Bodmer and Breitinger,¹⁰ following out lines of thought not dissimilar, with their insistence on the marvelous in poetry (falsity), and its moral aim, arrived by strictly logical processes at the conclusion that among poetic kinds, the first place should be accorded to—the Fable. Goethe laughed.¹¹

It appears, then, that even before the revival of the rimed fable in England, and during the period of the prose Aesop, there were voices asserting the poetic rank of the fable, at least by implication; but although these were notable, they found influence in this regard, which indeed was but incidental with them, only in the following century, Sidney with Davenant, and Bacon with Butler. The extravagance to which ideas inherent in their utterances were later pushed would have met with only contempt from them.

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⁹ *Original Letters*, London, 1721, p. 4.

¹⁰ *Kritische Dichtkunst*, 1740. The chapter on which Goethe comments is by Bodmer, not Breitinger. *J. J. Bodmer Denkschrift*, Theo. Vetter, Hans Bodmer, Hermann Bodmer, Zürich, 1900, p. 23. Also *J. J. Breitinger Sein Leben u. seine Litterarische Bedeutung*, Hermann Bodmer, Zürich, 1897, I, 74.

¹¹ *The Autobiography of Goethe*, trans. J. Oxenford, N. Y., 1895, I, 218.